
Tense War of Nerves in Lithuania May Be Backfiring for Gorbachev

In Other Republics, Resolve To Seek Independence Seems to Be Stiffening

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MOSCOW—Mikhail Gorbachev's intimidation campaign against Lithuania's self-proclaimed independence seems to be backfiring. Rather than scaring the Baltic state into submission, it is increasing the resolve of Lithuanians and radicals in other Soviet republics to push for secession from the Soviet Union.

Estonia's Communist Party voted to break ties with Moscow and set up its own party committed to independence. In neighboring Latvia, the results of first-round elections to the republic's parliament show that activists are very close to securing the two-thirds majority they need to declare national independence.

And further south, in the republic of Georgia, thousands attended a rally in the center of Tbilisi, the capital, to express support for Lithuania and press for their own republic's secession from the U.S.S.R.

The Soviet president continues to rule out negotiations with Lithuania and the other rebel republics over the terms of secession. Unless he changes his mind, only the use of military force now seems likely to curb the growing defiance. Few believe that Mr. Gorbachev will take such a drastic step in the peaceful Baltic states for fear of destroying his international reputation as a man of peace.

"There's a war of nerves going on," says Romualdas Razukas, a board member of the Latvian Popular Front, who is convinced Moscow's threats against Lithuania are merely bluff. "Gorbachev doesn't know what to do."

Nevertheless, Moscow drastically stepped up its campaign against Lithuania during the weekend in an attempt to demonstrate that it remains in charge. Among other measures, it ordered Western diplomats and some journalists out of the republic, confiscated weapons and even sent a column of about 100 tanks and armored cars through the streets of the capital, Vilnius.

In Washington, Bush administration officials are deeply concerned that the Lithuanian impasse could lead to violence quickly, undermining the entire policy of U.S. cooperation with Mr. Gorbachev's reform programs. In a reflection of this concern, the White House sharply stepped up its public warnings that Moscow should avoid responding with violence in Lithuania.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater summoned reporters to publicly protest Moscow's decision to force two U.S. diplomats to leave Lithuania. "This action certainly adds to our concerns," Mr. Fitzwater said. "It does not contribute to a lessening of tensions that would make pro-

ductive dialogue easier." In addition, President Bush has sent at least two private messages of concern in the past week, one through Secretary of State James Baker and the other through Brent Scowcroft, the national security adviser.

Senior U.S. officials believe that Mr. Gorbachev has mishandled the Lithuanian situation, raising concerns in Washington about his leadership skills. U.S. officials say privately that they believe Mr. Gorbachev didn't take advantage of several opportunities in past months to resolve the Lithuanian problem before it reached the current impasse.

The recently elected Lithuanian Parliament, which earlier this month overwhelmingly approved a declaration of the republic's independence, has continued to press ahead with forming a new government and severing links with the rest of the Soviet Union. Following the parade of tanks, Vytautas Landsbergis, an independence activist who was elected Lithuanian president, fired off an angry telegram to Mr. Gorbachev that said: "You know that we are armed only with . . . the belief we are right and in the values of freedom and democracy."

The latest focus of Moscow's anger are Lithuanian moves to set up a volunteer force to guard the republic's borders and a wave of Lithuanian desertions from the Soviet army. General Valentin Varennikov, the commander-in-chief of the Soviet land forces, was quoted in a Moscow newspaper as saying that Lithuania is "openly creating an army," of young, militant deserters.

"We want to secure that no clash takes place under any circumstances," the general added ominously.

Lithuania insists that the new units are not military, but are being formed to protect public order in case of emergency. Meanwhile, Mr. Landsbergis has advised Lithuanian deserters not to hide out with their families or friends, but to seek refuge instead in churches where they are likely to be safer.

Mr. Gorbachev's tough approach to the secession crisis has overshadowed his first days as the newly elected Soviet president. For some, his threats and ultimatums to Lithuania have raised fears that he will make use of his new authority to clamp down ruthlessly. Such worries have been strengthened by the inclusion of some powerful conservative figures in Mr. Gorbachev's new presidential council of advisers.

"You can feel the climate has changed," says Temuri Zhorzhiani, a leading Georgian independence activist. "Gorbachev is a dictator just like the others."

But many pro-independence activists in the Baltic region insist that the Soviet leader will eventually have no choice but to bow to their demands and negotiate secession sooner or later. They say that to do otherwise would destroy the credibility of Mr. Gorbachev's political reform program, with its stress on greater democracy, both at home and abroad. In the meantime, says Petros Tvarijonavicius, a Lithuanian academic and independence activist, "We are psychologically preparing for provocations."

Gerald F. Seib and Walter S. Mossberg in Washington contributed to this article.



President Gorbachev